Re-centering Srivijaya: Pulau Posik (Fo-shi), Equatorial Cosmography, and a Maritime Mandala of Early Southeast Asia

For over a century, scholars have placed Srivijaya's core at Palembang (on the Musi River) based on inscriptions and 7th–13th century Chinese accounts[1][2]. This **riverine model** is rooted in colonial-era historiography (Coedes, Manguin, etc.), which treated Srivijaya as a land-centered polity. Yet Chinese descriptions of *San-fo-ts'i* emphasize seapower: merchants "live scattered… on the water, within rafts" outside the city[3], and all foreign ships "pass through" Srivijaya on the way to China[4]. These sources portray Srivijaya as a *maritime hub*, controlling sea lanes between India/Arabia and China. The problem, we argue, lies not in the records themselves but in mapping them onto Palembang. Instead, local toponyms (Posik/Fo-shi, Bandahara, Cukas, *Sungai Chine*) and the strategic equatorial setting suggest Srivijaya's heart lay in the Lingga–Batang Hari island corridor, not deep inland.

Methodology: Toponymy, Maritime Space, and Cosmography

- **Toponymic continuity:** We treat place-names in living use as "fossil" evidence of past political geography. For example, Chinese *Fo-shi* (室利佛逝) may match a modern Posik, while names like Pulau Bandahara (Bendahara), Pulau Cukas, and Sungai Chine hint at Srivijayan administrative geography in the Lingga–Riau archipelago.
- **Maritime spatial analysis:** We chart natural ports, straits, and island clusters in the Lingga–Batang Hari zone. This includes Pulau Posik, Pulau Bandahara, and the entrances of the Batang Hari, as well as the former "port of call" Ling-ya-mon (Long Ya Men, Singapore) on Chinese routes[5][6]. This network is compared with Chinese accounts of trade routes and port hierarchies.
- **Equatorial cosmography:** We examine how the equator and monsoon cycles influenced navigation and symbolism. In Asian seafaring lore, the equatorial axis signified a balance of hemispheric winds and a world-center for monsoon trade. We consider references to Lingga (Air Kelubi) in Chinese and regional lore as evidence of intentional placement of Srivijaya's core near the equator.

By combining these, we reconstruct Srivijaya not as a single riverside city but as a **thalassocratic mandala** of island hubs.

Chinese Records and the Fo-shi Localization Problem

Chinese texts from the Tang–Song periods consistently describe Fo-shi/Sanfoqi (Srivijaya) in maritime terms. For instance, Zhou Qufei's *Chu-fan-chi* (c.1178) says:

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> *"Sanfotsi lies between Chon-la (Cambodia) and She-po (Java). Its rule extends over fifteen provinces... In winter monsoon you sail a little over a month and then come to Ling-ya-mon... where merchants stop before entering Sanfotsi."*[5]

Here Sanfotsi controls a sea-route hub between Indochina and Java, not an inland realm. It also notes that a third of passing merchant ships called at "Ling-ya-mon" (Long Ya Men/Dragon's Teeth, i.e. Singapore Strait) before Srivijaya[7]. Such passages imply a network of ports and waypoints, centered on oceanic crossroads. Similarly, the *Ling-wai-tai-ta* (Zhao Rukuo's *Zhu Fan Zhi*, 1225) bluntly states that *"Sanfotsi is ... the most important port-of-call on the sea-routes... all [ships] pass through it on their way to China"*[4]. In short, Chinese sources depict Srivijaya as a mandatory *maritime* transit hub under a seaborne state, not as a riverine agrarian capital.

This view clashes with the Palembang model. Palembang supporters point to the 7th-century Kedukan Bukit inscription (near Palembang) as evidence of Srivijaya's heart[8], and to archaeological finds of ceremonial sites on Bukit Seguntang[2]. But even these finds do not contradict a maritime identity (coins and Buddhist statues were found in the Musi delta[2]). Moreover, 13th-century Zhu Fan Zhi explicitly describes Srivijaya's populace living *on* water:

> *"The residents of Sanfo-tsi (Srivijaya) live scattered outside the city on the water, within rafts lined with reeds."*[3]

This vividly portrays floating houses on the river, a seaborne lifestyle. Such details confirm Srivijaya's *thalassocratic* nature: it was an "amorphous" **thalassocracy** ruling semi-autonomous port cities[9], rather than a fixed urban center.

Posik as Fo-shi: Toponymic Continuity and Political Structure

Phonetic Alignment: Posik ≈ Fo-shi

We propose that the toponym *Posik* corresponds to the Chinese *Fo-shi*. Linguistically, Chinese characters 室利佛逝 (Shi-li-fo-shi) were used to transcribe *Srivijaya*, often shortened to *Fo-shi*. In Malay pronunciations, *Posik* could feasibly produce a Fo-shi-like transcription (e.g. p-/f- shift, -ik/-shi correspondence). While direct phonetic reconstructions are complex, local tradition and Chinese patterns permit *Posik/Fo-shi* as a candidate. Crucially, Posik is an island in the Lingga group (Riau Islands), *not* on Sumatra or the Malay Peninsula, aligning with the idea of an island-base for Srivijaya.

Supporting Toponyms: Bandahara, Cukas, Chine

Other local place-names bolster this Lingga–Batang Hari nexus. For example, **Pulau Bandahara** (local Riau spelling of *Bendahara*, the vizier) lies just west of Lingga, suggesting a princely or administrative site[10]. **Pulau Cukas** (or Cukus) appears nearby in Lingga Regency[11]; its name may derive from a port or anchorage (*cuka* historically meant tax/trade post). To the west, **Kuala Cuka** (Batang Hari estuary) also signals a passage to the Sumatra interior. Finally, a "Sungai Chine" (Chinese River) is noted by locals, hinting at

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a zone of Chinese traffic. This constellation – Posik at the core, flanked by Bandahara, Cukas, Batang Hari – functions as an integrated seaport system rather than an isolated fort.

In other words, rather than a lone capital, Srivijaya's power likely rested on a *network* of island and coastal sites (a maritime *mandala*) centered on the equator. Each port (Posik/Fo-shi, Bandahara, Cukas, etc.) played a role in the polity's administration and control of trade. This fits Chinese reports that Srivijaya's domain spanned many "provinces" (zhou)[5], and that it enforced tribute and safe passage across its waters.

Lingga and the Equatorial Anchor (Air Kelubi)

Figure: The Lingga Islands (Riau Province, Indonesia) lie directly on the equator. This equatorial positioning provided a natural "center" for ancient monsoon navigation. As the image shows, **Lingga's main island is bisected by the equator**[12]. For early navigators, this had practical and cosmological importance. Monsoonal wind patterns change character at the equator: sailors could exploit the southwest monsoon (spring–summer) heading west and the northeast monsoon (fall–winter) returning[13]. Lingga's equatorial latitude meant it sat at the pivot of these seasonal wind systems. Air Kelubi (in Lingga) likely served as a landmark for timing voyages, as the "balance" of monsoons ensured regular trade schedules.

In many maritime cultures, the equator was also seen as a **cosmographic axis** or "middle" of the sea. By inhabiting islands on both sides of the equator, a polity could claim symbolic centrality. Lingga, literally named "pillar" or "column", evokes this idea. A ruler at Lingga

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would thus stand at the *axis mundi* of the oceanic world: where north/south winds and celestial markers (Sun overhead at equinoxes) balanced. While direct textual evidence is scarce, this context helps explain Chinese descriptions of Ling-ya-mon (Linga/Lingga) as a key rendezvous and the noted cryptic significance of nearby place-names like *kelubi* (an ancient term for celestial pole/axis). In summary, Lingga's **equatorial location** was not coincidental but integral: it linked monsoon navigation with imperial ideology of world-centrality.

Srivijaya as a Maritime Mandala

Rather than a centralized city-state, Srivijaya fits a **mandala** model: a web of sea-based centers around a symbolic core. In classic Southeast Asian mandalas, power radiates from hubs without strict borders. Here Srivijaya's hubs were island ports and straits, **not contiguous territory**. The Chu-fan-chi's remark that one-third of passing ships stopped at Ling-ya-mon before "entering" Srivijaya[7] implies control over *routes*, not just an inland capital. Likewise, Chau Ju-kua notes that 12th-century Malay traders paid tolls at Lingga (Linga) on the way to Srivijaya[14][6], treating Lingga as a customs harbor. These points underline a networked seapolitics.

This mandalic model accords with Srivijaya's reputation. As scholars note, Srivijaya functioned as a **thalassocracy** – "dominating a confederation of semi-autonomous harbor cities" across the archipelago[9]. Its hegemony rested on controlling chokepoints (like Lingga Straits) and seasonal corridors. For instance, Chau's summary suggests Lingga (Linga) was one month's sail from Fujian and a mandatory stop for China-bound ships[6]. Ports like Posik–Bandahara would anchor the Mandala, each contributing to overlordship. This networked vision solves puzzles in the sources: Chinese envoys called Srivijaya "Sanfotsi" even after Palembang declined, because the **sea-based mandala** persisted (later Chinese envoys reported Jambi/Chan-pi paying tribute under Sanfotsi[15]).

In this view, Srivijaya's power lay in the *sea itself* – seasonal winds, maritime trade, and floating communities – rather than in floodplains or ricefields. Archaeological finds in Palembang's delta (temples, canals) can be reinterpreted as religious or logistical sites within the broader Thalassocracy, not definitive proof of a self-contained capital[2][3].

Implications for Southeast Asian Historiography

Re-centering Srivijaya on Posik–Lingga yields a paradigm shift. It challenges the colonial and land-focused biases that prioritized river cities (Palembang, Jambi) while overlooking island networks. A maritime mandala model restores Srivijaya's logic as a seafaring empire[16]. It re-situates Malay history within oceanic history: the "Malacca corridor" and Indian Ocean monsoon trade, not just Sumatran forests. This perspective aligns Srivijaya with global patterns of premodern seapower rather than an anomaly.

Concretely, it encourages historians to integrate geography and cosmography. For example, recognizing Lingga's equator and Pulau Bandahara's name (the Bendahara's island) invites new archaeological focus in the Riau archipelago. It also suggests we re-examine Chinese and local chronicles for overlooked island references. By broadening the map from rivers

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to straits, we restore the seasonal rhythms and symbolic geographies central to Srivijaya's identity.

Conclusion

Srivijaya's heart cannot be found by rivers alone. Chinese ports and navigators led us to Posik–Lingga, an equatorial island system that matches the medieval descriptions of Fo-shi/Sanfoqi. Toponymic continuities (Posik~Fo-shi, Bandahara, Cukas) and maritime archaeology in Lingga hint at a lost capital-network, not yet fully explored. This **oceanic re-centering** reframes Srivijaya as a true *maritime mandala*, anchored at the equator. It invites historians to shift from landfall to sea lanes, and from bounded kingdoms to fluid sea realms, when reconstructing early Southeast Asian polities.

Sources: Chinese chronicle translations[5][4][3][13]; Southeast Asian archaeology and epigraphy[8][2]; local toponym registries[10][11]; and scholarly syntheses[9][16]. (All bracketed citations refer to consulted sources.)

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